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Can Anyone Stop Hillary?

An Embarrassment of Riches

John C. Hulsman

Ist Hillary Clinton die Nominierung als demokratischer Präsidentschaftskandidat noch zu nehmen? In den landesweiten Umfragen führt sie mit 25 Prozentpunkten vor ihren schärfsten Rivalen, den Senatoren Obama und Edwards, und im Vorwahlkampf ist ihr noch kein Fehler unterlaufen. Unter den Demokraten kann die ehemalige First Lady auf die schlagkräftigste Wahlkampforganisation, das beste Netzwerk und die meisten Spendengelder zurückgreifen. Zusätzlich verleiht ihr Ehemann ihrer Wahlkampagne staatsmännische Glaubwürdigkeit. Doch anders als Obama und Edwards schafft es Hillary Clinton nicht, die Herzen ihrer Anhänger zu begeistern: sie wird respektiert, nicht aber geliebt. Weil Clinton so stark polarisiert, ist sie zudem die Wunschgegnerin vieler Republikaner. Nichts motiviert konservative Wähler so sehr wie der Name Clinton auf dem Stimmzettel, und so könnte von ihrer Nominierung am Ende ein anderer profitieren: ihr bislang größter Konkurrent im republikanischen Lager, der ehemalige New Yorker Bürgermeister Rudy Giuliani.

Curiously, there is one point on which almost all election pundits have so far agreed about the 2008 Presidential Race—Hillary Clinton has yet to put a foot wrong. Ahead by 25 plus points for the Democratic nomination in all national polls, Senator Clinton also has the momentum with her; her lead has been consistently widening.

Her strengths as a candidate are legion. Taking up where her husband left off, Hillary's campaign team, from super pollster Mark Penn down, is viewed as the class of the 2008 election. She has generated the most money, has the best organization, and has routinized campaign decision-making to an art, both staying on message, as well as quickly rebutting her opponents' charges against her. She has the best network of any of the major Democratic candidates—official Demo-

cratic Washington is largely a paid-up subsidiary of the Clinton campaign. It has been a joyless campaign in many respects; she draws smaller and less enthusiastic crowds than her main rival Senator Barack Obama of Illinois. But that has not stopped her from pulling away from both Obama and John Edwards in the national polls, making herself the obvious person to beat for the nomination.

Senator Clinton has a number of other unique advantages. Her husband is the undoubted political genius of his generation. In terms of both fund raising and generating political buzz on the campaign trail, Bill Clinton remains a rock star. He is easily more popular with the Democratic caucus than any candidate now in the race, with an overwhelming 88 percent of Democrats viewing him favorably. His mere presence gives

Hillary credibility with the Democratic base that the other candidates can only dream about.

Senator Clinton also benefits from a generic rise in support for Democrats, with the effects of the disastrous Iraq war and bungling in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina scarring the Bush administration in particular and Republicanism in general. While five years ago Americans were evenly divided in terms of party affiliation, now Democrats have a whopping fifteen point edge, 50 to 35 percent. This change in generic support has had concrete financial ramifications. Contrary to the norm, the Democratic field has out-raised Republican candidates for President by a mammoth 70 percent. In terms of state polls, Ohio and Virginia, both Bush victories in 2000 and 2004, are now trending solidly Democratic. Pennsylvania, a toss up state that went Democratic in both 2000 and 2004, is now a Democratic lock. Hillary is riding a general wave of Democratic support as well.

Finally, Senator Clinton is viewed personally as the un-Bush; during the seemingly endless series of Democratic debates she has sparked, speaking in complete paragraphs and displaying a truly impressive policy analyst's grasp of the most complicated issues. Following September 11th, the Iraq debacle, and Katrina, there is a strong feeling in the country that the U.S. must have a president who does not need on the job training, who is above all competent and can navigate the dangerous post-Cold War world in which we live. Hillary is the prime beneficiary of this powerful undercurrent.

Before we measure the drapes...

However, it is important to remember that in the 2004 election cycle at this point Howard Dean was the all-but-anointed winner, while John Kerry was mortgaging his house to keep his shoestring campaign alive; a lot can change in the coming few months before New Hampshire and Iowa.

Senator Clinton remains the most polarizing major political figure in American politics; the latest Pew poll has her with an unfavorable rating of 39 percent, a huge obstacle to overcome. There is a gender gap in Senator Clinton's support, with men far less favorably disposed to her than women. Nor does this negative number vary, as both supporters and detractors seem to have long ago made their mind up about her personally. This is not the case with Senator Edwards and especially Senator Obama, who remain far less well known, and could conceivably catch fire during the nomination process.

For the other Democratic challengers, Iowa remains the critical state. While miles ahead in national polls, Americans vote for the presidential nominees by state. According to the last Real Clear Politics amalgamation of polls, Iowa remains a horse race. As of October 14th, Clinton led there with 29 percent of the vote, with Obama and Edwards close behind at 24 and 21 percent, respectively. A loss in Iowa, coupled with the free positive press such an upset would produce, could propel one of her challengers forward. Further, an Obama win would almost certainly force Edwards from the race, uniting the 'Anyone but Hillary,' wing of the party behind a single candidate. Indeed, in the national polls, if Edwards' and Obama's support is put together, it roughly equals that of Senator Clinton.

Also, defeat in Iowa would tarnish Senator Clinton's air of inevitability, perhaps the single greatest asset she currently has in the race, as fund-raising and organizational support follow in their wake. Hillary does not inspire the fervor of either Edwards or Obama, and is viewed especially suspiciously by the left of her party, for her vote in favor of the Iraq war as well as her refusal to name a date for an American withdrawal from Baghdad. Her detractors have been muted, as they have seen her campaign juggernaut roll ahead. She is respected, but not loved. If defeated, she cannot rely on the core base of support both her rivals, and especially Obama, possess.

Finally, and ironically, Senator Clinton's breakout lead is proving a major factor in the Republican race. Mayor Giuliani, seemingly out of touch with the Republican base on the core social issues so important to Republican social conservatives (who comprise roughly one-third of the party), still finds himself ten points clear of former Senator Fred Thompson in the national poll numbers. Intriguingly, Giuliani is in a dead heat with Thompson in South Carolina, traditionally one of the most conservative states in the union.

What can explain this? Mayor Giuliani's argument has been skillfully put before the skeptical Republican base. 'You may disagree with me on social issues, but we agree on low taxes, a strong national defense ... and I am the only one to keep Hillary Clinton from the White House.' This latter point is his trump card, as many Republicans will overlook almost anything else to keep the hated Clintons from returning to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. There is something in the

mayor's argument; the latest polls have Clinton barely ahead of Giuliani in a national race, 47 to 45 percent. Giuliani can take the race to Democratically leaning states like New York and Connecticut in a way no other Republican nominee can manage. While the race remains Senator Clinton's to lose, she has generated countervailing political pressure in both parties that may still prove her undoing.



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